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The "Pearl Effect": Familial Taboos of the South in E. A. Poe, E. Glasgow, P. Taylor and W. Faulkner

As we read in Williamson's biography of Faulkner (1993: 387), ironically as this may sound, the phenomenon of incest in the South should be linked to Southern gentlemen's shyness with women other than their mothers, sisters or first cousins. The turn of the century chronicles of the South show that as far as crime rate in the region was concerned at the time, it was only the number of cases connected with incest that were constantly on the rise – although incest was then solely defined as a sexual relationship with a young girl closely related to her oppressor, and not a relationship between adults who would enter into a seemingly "innocent" marriage despite close kinship (Williamson 1993: 99). Moreover, it was almost a fashion in the nineteenth-century South to marry within pairs of brothers and sisters who were close friends, which led to all manner of irregularities concerning the children, especially upon the death of one of the spouses and the remarriage of the other (Williamson 1993: 388).

Further in his book, Williamson (1993: 401–2) defines what he calls the "pearl effect" as "the capacity of the Southern community for not seeing" what is perfectly visible otherwise, i.e. the truth about their own guilt, and taking appearances and wishful thinking for reality instead. In the South, as in an oyster's shell, a grain of sand quickly ceases to be an irritant, and, lacquered over, creates a perfectly smooth surface of a pearl, which looks harmonious and beautiful to the outer world. Refusing to accept the truth about the past of their region, white Southerners become guilty of collective amnesia. By closing their eyes to the white abuse of familial relations in both the African American and the white contexts, they pretend that the problem does not exist, and thus perpetuate the "pearl effect."

This collective amnesia of the South finds its literary manifestation in the recurrence in Southern American literature of the brother-and-sister theme invariably related to the motif of physical annihilation of one or the other, or one by the other (e.g. murder in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," euthanasia in Glasgow's "Jordan's End," fratricide in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, suicide

in his *The Sound and the Fury*), as ways of eliminating the irritant and erasing undesirable memory in order to restore the pearl's smooth surface.

In his famous Gothic tale "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1840), Poe – himself a Southerner and a believer in vagueness as a mark of a story's greatness – exploits the brother-and-sister motif, with all its ambiguities, using his literary method of an aesthetic effect for the purpose, thus altogether escaping the issue of the moral evaluation of the phenomena he describes, and therefore maintaining the "pearl effect."

The resultant moral incapacitation of an outsider in Poe's story – accomplished through the aesthetization of the collective memory of the South about incest – finds its manifestation in the mysteriousness, isolation and decadence of the Usher family, hermetically enclosed in the tale's fictional world. What contributes to their state of alienation, paradoxically, is the presence in the story of the narrator, who, despite his outsidedness, is in reality Roderick's former schoolmate and as such a safeguard of the "pearl effect" in the Usher family, which "had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch" as "the entire family lay in the direct line of descent" (Poe 1955: 129).

Succumbing to the pervasive influence of the house (and the family), the narrator is unable to perceive them from the position of an outsider. As a result, he is not only unaware of his own part in Lady Madeleine's death but even incapable of recognizing the act as crime, the fact which likewise escapes the attention of the reader, who, just as the narrator, represents the outer world. Thus, ironically, in Poe's story an outsider helps to sanction the ambiguous status quo of the Usher family rather than unveil it, for any intrusion into the hermetic reality of the South is instantly channelled, its perpetrator assimilated to become part of the reality whose disgraceful aspects he was originally meant to expose.

The abortive attempt of the brother at annihilating his twin sister in "The Fall of the House of Usher" can be perceived as both a failure to eradicate "the family evil" (Poe 1955: 131) and to violate the collective memory of the South about the brother-and-sister relationship, which, as the story shows by Madeleine breaking free from her live entombment to destroy her brother and the house, can be erased at no small costs. The history of the South is not a clean slate to be filled in anew: its familial taboos lie dormant in it like the remnants of the house of Usher at the bottom of the tarn.

An imitator of Poe's Gothic tales almost a century later, Ellen Glasgow, leaves little room for speculation in her story of young Alan's mysterious illness in "Jordan's End" (1923). Her technique of Chinese boxes in introducing the

taboo theme of incest anticipates some grim family secret, guarding it jealously whenever the truth about the South is in danger of being exposed. Through this technique, the narrator – a doctor, who, as in Poe, is an outsider, becomes as if twice removed from the secret: by being called to Alan in replacement of the actual family doctor, and by being directed to the house through the agency of two dwarfed and hunched mulattoes, straight from the racial theories of the age, also twice removed from the family as their servants and racial others. Hence, Glasgow's Chinese boxes in "Jordan's End," just as Poe's aesthetization in "The Fall of the House of Usher," function as safeguards of the familial taboos of the South and a manifestation of its collective amnesia in perpetuating the "pearl effect."

As it appears upon a closer examination of Glasgow's story, the author's technique does not so much bar access to the secret of the Jordans' hereditary disease – now affecting both the male and the female lines, excepting Alan's young wife, Judith, as the first one to have come from outside of the family – as to the missing element of this and many other Southern puzzles – the brother-and-sister relationship, seemingly absent from the story other than through implication, in the presence in the house of three aunts, whose husbands are already confined to mental institutions. The missing link, however, appears with a little piece of pink baby garment crocheted by the three women in the family which already has a nine-year-old brother of the little sister-to-come.

The question is how the aunts, already affected by the family disease themselves, know what colour the baby's garment should be if we do not even know *that*, or *if*, Judith is pregnant – unless they are indeed the Fates, as Glasgow refers to them symbolically, perpetuating the collective guilt of the South, while Judith and the narrator, albeit both outsiders to the family, although not to the South, are thus bound to secure the "pearl effect," this unique ability of the South to absorb the inconvenient witnesses of the truth about itself in order to maintain the impeccable image of its own harmony.

What strikes one about Judith and the doctor is their refusal to feel guilty about their involvement in Alan's unexpected death (hers through mercy killing and his through the prescription). What is more, Judith is ready to "assist" her little son, as she did his father, when "the time comes" (Glasgow 1966: 203), as she confesses to the doctor with remarkable, if not callous, composure. Her dream-like imperturbability over the matter of her husband's sudden death matches the doctor's inability to face the inconvenient reality, both evocative of Poe's aesthetization of the collective guilt of the South:

> I had never seen a creature who appeared so withdrawn, so detached, from all human associations ... Wrapped in that silence as in a cloak, she walked across the windrifts of leaves ... Her step was so slow, so unhurried, that I remember thinking she moved like one who had all eternity before her. (Glasgow 1966: 214)

> [...] I knew that the question on my lips would never be uttered. I should always remain ignorant of the truth. The thing I feared most, standing there alone with her, was that some accident might solve the mystery before I could escape. (Glasgow 1966: 216)

Oddly enough, it is not the truth about the euthanasia that the doctor dreads but its disclosure, just as it is not the moral dimension of incest in her family that bothers Judith but its sheer physical aspect in the form of the hereditary disease – both attitudes targeted at preserving the "pearl effect."

The mechanism of the collective amnesia of the South and its final exposition is best illustrated by a contemporary short story of Peter Taylor, titled "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time" (1959), where the truth about the South is exploded by an outsider in an attempt at counteracting the "pearl effect." The role of the outsider in the story is performed by Tom Bascombs, Ned Meriwether's close friend and a supplier of paper flowers for very mysterious and very suggestive teenage brother-and-sister balls organized annually by the Dorsets, an elderly brother-and-sister couple in a small Southern town of West Vesey. At Ned's instigation, Tom, the non-brother, plays a trick on the hosts by replacing Ned at his sister Emily's side on one of those occasions.

The origin of the idea has nothing to do with its consequences and is passed over in silence in the story, except one seemingly insignificant comment provided by Ned and Emily's elder and a former participant in a Dorset ball, who thus explains the reason why Emily and Ned quarrelled over which one of them knew Tom "first" and "better": "We could have told him what it was, I think. But we didn't. It would have been too hard to say to him that at one time or another all of us in West Vesey had had our Tom Bascombs" (Taylor 1977: 618). These puzzling words become clear only in the context of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* The "Tom Bascombs" are Charles Bons, i.e. Southern brothers' closest friends, to whom the former are prepared to give their sisters away in marriage without misgivings about the latter "touch[ing] parts of [their] sister[s'] bod[ies] that [they] will never see and touch," (Faulkner 1972: 328), as Henry Sutpen confides in his half-brother Charles Bon before finding out that they are related or that Bon has some black blood.

The above interpretation is confirmed by Ned's reaction to seeing his sister being kissed by Tom at a ball meant exclusively for brothers-and-sisters, a gesture received with approval by the Dorsets and the other brother-and-sister couples unaware of Tom's identity. Appalled by the sight, Ned exclaims: "'Don't you *know*?' he wailed, as if in great physical pain. 'Can't you *tell*? Can't you see who they *are*? They're *brother* and *sister*!'" (Taylor 1977: 625) The subtle irony of that scene suggests that what Ned – the brother – is in fact shocked by is that it is Tom – the non-brother – rather than himself that is kissing his sister, i.e. they are kissing *although* they *are not* siblings rather than *because* they *are*. Ned's reaction makes him similar to other Southern gentlemen – Henry Sutpen from *Absalom, Absalom!* and Quentin from *The Sound and the Fury* – in that he relegates the truth about himself and his incestuous desire for his sister into the unconscious, thus inscribing himself into the collective amnesia of the South.

In Taylor's story, exposed by a non-brother, the myth of the South is exploded on the borderline between reality and illusion, aestheticism and morality, art and sensuality. The suggestive ambiguity of the decorations accompanying the Dorset balls – subtly fragrant flowers and intimately lit sensuous paintings of French and Italian masters, remain in keeping with the "doing pretty" manner and the "pearl effect" mentality of the South, which thus absorbs the inconvenient truths unto itself. In Faulkner, multiple narrators striving in vain to reconstruct a single Southern story, the author's oxymoronic imagination in asserting presence by absence as well as his method of denegation (Pitavy 1989: 45) can be perceived as manifestations of and a counteraction against the "pearl effect," with a view to exposing the disconcerting truth about two major taboos of his region, incest and miscegenation.

Hidden under the guise of obsession over his imagined incest with his sister Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*, lies Quentin's obsessive fear of miscegenation and his morbid doubts as to his idiot brother Benjy's, and thus also his own, racial identity: "I was not who was not was not who. [...] Benjamin the child of. How he used to sit before that mirror [...] Benjamin the child of mine old age held hostage into Egypt. O Benjamin. [...] They come into white people's lives like that in sudden sharp black tricles that isolate white facts" (Faulkner 1954: 211). *Absalom, Absalom!*, seemingly concerned with the forbidden fruit of incest as applied to half-siblings (Judith and Bon), especially if one of them is a half-breed, rather than to a full-blooded brother-and-sister relationship (Judith and Henry), in fact features an act of fratricide triggered by the latter.

Hence in *The Sound and the Fury* Quentin commits suicide not only on account of Caddy's lost virginity, or his own obsession with time, but also because of his morbid preoccupation with the shadow of his own racially suspect self, so as to protect his sister from his own shadowy alter ego, as suggested by Irwin (1986: 34) in "Doubling and Incest," while in *Absalom, Absalom!* Henry kills his half-brother to prevent miscegenation as well as incest that he cannot himself partake of. The seemingly absurd question that forces itself upon the reader at this point is whether in the South incest has perhaps been perceived as a preventive of miscegenation.

The parallel drawn in *Absalom, Absalom*! between the two half-brothers, Henry and Bon, on the one hand, and the two narrators trying to reconstruct their story, Quentin and his Canadian Harvard roommate, Shreve, on the other hand, puts Shreve and Quentin in an apparently impossible position of half-brothers, one of them a half-breed, both tied to each other, like Henry and Bon, as Faulkner says, with an umbilical cord. Since Shreve's racial and national identity seems unquestionable, of the two of them it is Quentin that emerges as a half-breed. The missing element of this double brotherly puzzle in the latter case, though, is the sister, whose existence Quentin never admits to Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!* – until we meet Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*. By analogy with the Henry-Judith-Bon trio then, Quentin's silence about Caddy, paradoxically, establishes him and Shreve as rivals.

The clue to Shreve's position in the Quentin-Caddy-Shreve trio can be found in *The Sound and the Fury* in the seemingly inconspicuous character of Versh (the anagram of Shreve), Dilsey's black (or mulatto?) son, whom she assures at one point that he and his brothers have "jes es much Compson devilment" (Faulkner 1954: 344) in them as does Jason, Quentin and Caddy's greedy brother, suggesting thereby the existence under the Compson roof of a shadow family, a common enough phenomenon in the South. Ironically, Versh features as Quentin's rival in both incest and miscegenation in an episode from their childhood, when, appalled by his daring gesture, Quentin prevents him from helping Caddy take off her dress when she muddies her drawers.

This interpretation would help to account for two inconspicuous but puzzling passages in *The Sound and the Fury*, which have not received enough critical attention (cf. Branny 1997: 153–4). The first is a folk story about the multiplying "*bluegum*" children (mulattoes?) who one day ate Quentin's Grandfather, in which Versh addresses Benjy, referring to his suspect identity, which Quentin is also troubled by in the already cited passage:

> They are making a bluegum out of you. Mammy say in old time your grandpa changed nigger's name, and he turn preacher, and when they look at him, he bluegum too. Didn't use to be bluegum, neither. And when family woman look him in the eye in the full of the moon, chile born bluegum. And one evening, when they was about a dozen them bluegum chillen running round the place, he never come home. Possum hunters found him in the woods, et clean. And you know who et him. Them blegum chillen did. (Faulkner 1954: 84–85)

The passage is reminiscent of the famous Shreve prophecy at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, whereby the "*bluegum chillen*" become Bond Jim[s] (note the homophone with Benjy), who, as Shreve asserts, will one day "conquer the western hemisphere. [. . .] and will bleach out like rabbits and the birds [. . .] so in a few thousand years" he himself "will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (Faulkner 1972: 378), the statement which puts Shreve in the seemingly impossible position of a half-breed.

The other puzzling passage, this time from *Absalom, Absalom!*, features Quentin and Shreve, "*both being the father*" (Faulkner 1972: 261–62), a seemingly impossible option, thus appropriately marked by numerous maybe's in Faulkner's text, unless Shreve is indeed Versh, and thus the case of the Southern "pearl effect" in the making:

> Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool. . . . Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father. (Faulkner 1972: 261–2)

Dilsey's apocalyptic testimony about seeing "de beginnin, en now . . . de endin" (Faulkner 1954: 371) of the Compson family, her remark about her own children's "Compson devilment," Versh's hints about Benjy being "*a bluegum*" child as well as Quentin's obsession with the idea of a shadow, and his musing about his own and Benjy's identity in front of a mirror, coupled with numerous other hints in the novel, confirm the existence of an extensive shadow family in the Compson yard, which most possibly includes the two seemingly white brothers – Benjy and Quentin, although the characteristic amnesia of the South rules out the possibility of admitting any such phenomenon (cf. Branny 2007: 59–66 and 1997: 142–57).

Just as in his narrative section Benjy is constantly reported to be followed by the shadow of Versh and the other Gibson brothers – so in his obsession

with Caddy and the shadow Quentin in his section is constantly accompanied by the shadow of Shreve: just before his suicide he puts a letter to Shreve in his pocket, brushes his teeth with Shreve's toothpaste, borrows a brush from him, with which he cleans his hat before leaving, and finally, and very significantly, puts his Grandfather's watch, the one he got from his father, a mark of incest and miscegenation in the Compson household, into Shreve's drawer.

Hence Shreve and Versh seem to function in *The Sound and the Fury* as "obverse reflection[s]" (Faulkner 1954: 106) of each other – and indeed literally so if one considers the name reversal – just as all blacks are of the whites in the South, as Quentin claims at the end of the novel. If Versh is indeed Quentin's mulatto half-brother, and Shreve is Versh's negative, then, in the Quentin-Caddy-Shreve trio it would have to be Quentin whose racial identity would be questionable – "both he and Shreve the father" – although Shreve is not a Compson, unless he is indeed Versh, and hence a Gibson, a mirror image, a shadow of the Compsons, charmed by the Southern "pearl effect," Southern manner of "doing pretty," into his oxymoronic negative – a *white non-Amercan*, *non-Southerner*, *non-Compson*, in confirmation of the phenomenon discussed in this paper.

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